

The Golden String

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THE VISION OF ABHISHIKTANANDA

Stefano Rossi

The growing interest that has developed in the last years towards Eastern religions was seen by Abhishiktananda as "one of the best reasons of hope in the crisis through which at present the world is passing." At the same time, so that this hope can be truly well placed, it is absolutely necessary that the meeting with Eastern thought take place along a genuine path of inquiry. Only when the Western mind is ready simply to listen to the word without discussing it will it be able to receive the message that India hands on by its age-old texts or by the words of its genuine sages without infatuation or prejudice.

The flourishing of what has been called the "supermarket of religions" shows that the West is still far from understanding what is the "right level, the only level at which it is possible to discover the East in its true character." The idea of being able to choose the religion that we find most fascinating or interesting shows how the mind, even though driven by a sincere desire for inquiry, is highly conditioned by the psychological, mythical and consolatory aspect of religion, all the while losing sight of its true meaning. Different religions, after all, originate from the spiritual experiences of great personalities who, in order to transmit their wisdom, have expressed themselves through the myths and language peculiar to their culture. Yet the experience of the Absolute goes beyond every word and every concept; it is the deep comprehension of Being beyond every accidental

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HOW TO BE A MYSTIC IN THE WORLD

Wayne Teasdale

More and more people everywhere are awakening to a longing for an experiential kind of spirituality. There is in America today an intense interest in and fascination with monasteries, contemplation, and spirituality, with retreat houses, dharma centers, zendos, and other meditation facilities. This is a trend that is here to stay, and has been recognized for some time now, especially in publishing and in spiritual life itself. I remember a penetrating article on this perennial longing in *Publishers Weekly* (4/14/00) by Kimberly Winston, entitled "Get Thee to a Monastery". The author was discussing the reasons why so many in our time are passionately interested in the contemplative life and in its monastic expression, whether Christian or Buddhist. She noted the work of the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton who awakened a global audience of readers to the depth, richness and importance of the contemplative experience, or the life with God in mystical prayer, especially as it is lived in monastic life. She mentioned many other authors who have popularized the interest in monasticism and contemplation, particularly Kathleen Norris.

She mentioned the contribution of the contemporary Trappist spiritual master Thomas Keating as providing a practical way of contemplation in his centering prayer, which is spreading all around Christianity now. He has brought the precious treasure of the contemplative life to the people through his teaching, which is quite comprehensive, and through his global organization, Contemplative Outreach. In my own development as a contemplative in the world, Thomas Keating has guided me personally since my youth, and I have learned the whole range of the spiritual life from him directly. In a very real sense, Abbot Thomas is my spiritual father, and I have found that my work intentionally builds on and complements his.

Bringing the benefits of life in a mature, healthy monastic milieu to the world, to people living very active lives, is the whole purpose of my recent book, *A Monk in the World: Cultivating a Spiritual Life*, as it is also, to some extent, of my earlier work, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*. I have been concerned for many years with the state of spiritual life among ordinary people because the churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples have generally neglected the deeper

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The Golden String

How to be a Mystic

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exploration that spirituality in its mystical dimension affords. These religious institutions normally concern themselves with only public worship, usually only once a week, and not with a complete program of spiritual practice every day. Long experience has taught so many of us that in order for the spiritual life to be effective in growth and transformation it has to be a total personal commitment, that each one of us must take responsibility for his or her own spiritual journey. It is that willingness and that commitment itself as it takes shape in a person's life that distinguishes mere religion from spirituality and a more mature religious way of life.

A Monk in the World unfolds a practical vision of how an ordinary — and not so ordinary — individual, living a busy life can achieve the same level of depth and intimacy with the Divine, or can increase their awareness of the nature of the Sacred in daily experience. As the subtitle suggests, *Cultivating a Spiritual Life*, this book is designed to assist the reader in finding his or her path in the spiritual journey without leaving the world, their family, friends, their work, and other commitments.

I employ the word “world” in three senses: the natural world, the human community, and the whole realm of culture. We need to recognize, for the sake of reality itself, that the real world is actually the natural world, or the surrounding nature, the Earth, on which we live, and move and have our very being. This is literally the case, whether we like it or not; indeed, whether we acknowledge it or not. Without the natural world, we have nothing, not even a spiritual life in this realm of existence. Derivatively, the word “world” means the human society in which we are born and find ourselves at any time during the course of our lives. The third sense in which the world is meant is the matter of culture that the human family has developed, and continues to do so. All three forms of the world are significant for us in our own evolution in the spiritual life, since they each nourish and inspire us, and take care of all our needs for sustenance.

There is also a negative sense in which the term “world” is used, and it is a traditional usage in the spiritual lexicon of many saints, mystics, and other sages. This negative meaning originates in the Desert Tradition of early Christianity in the primordial monastic experience. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers who retired to the barren wilderness to find God, “the world” was synonymous with sin, moral corruption, illusion, greed, worldliness and confusion. They fled this kind of social milieu for the clarity, sanity and peace of the desert. The “world” in this sense is the place of shallow, illusory values, and it was these values that they construed as the “world”.

Even in our own day we must steer clear of this morally and spiritually dead place where there is so much self-indulgent behavior and materialism. The way to avoid this sort of rut is to be certain what our life is really about, or what we wish it to be about, by maintaining our spiritual discipline in the midst of the fashions, fads, and false values of

such a social world. It takes determination, imagination, and creativity, but it can be done.

Living a genuine, viable, and effective spiritual life in the utterly frenetic pace and busyness of our culture requires of us to pursue a regular spiritual discipline and practice. This is the area of prayer, meditation, of silence, solitude and spiritual reading, and for some, of yoga, chanting, and perhaps t'ai chi. All spiritual practice aims at intimacy with the Divine, or greater awareness, and our transformation, or mystical goal, and a human evolution of moral and spiritual development. Spiritual practice is the crux of a monk, or mystic in the world, and is indispensable to our spiritual journey. Without it, breakthroughs are virtually impossible; growth and transformation are difficult. The great peaks of the spiritual life, or the mystical experiences, emerge out of the regularity of our committed practice, that is, out of our prayer, whatever form that may take for us.

The contemplative experience in the world, or for that matter, in the cloister, is made considerably easier if we have like-minded persons to share it with, and these are our truest friends. Ananda, the beloved disciple of the Buddha, asked the master if friendship was half of the spiritual life, whereupon the Buddha responded: “Nay, Ananda, it is the whole of the spiritual life.” A spiritual friend is, as the monks of the Middle Ages knew, a *custos animi*, a guardian of your soul, a soul-friend, someone intimately connected with our inner life and spiritual practice. Spiritual friendship provides the deep support we need, especially in the American culture which is not as appreciative of the mystical life.

A contemplative, mystic, or monk in the world, one who attempts to live a full spiritual life in the world, integrates time, work, and money, and indeed, all areas of his or her existence into their vision of spirituality. Theirs is a view and a practice that aims at leaving nothing out, of redeeming all aspects of life in their understanding of a viable mysticism and practice. Time is precious; work is sacred, and money is holy, but only if each of these is consecrated by our intention to see them in relationship to our goal of surrender to the Divine, or infinite awareness, and transformation into loving kindness, mercy, compassion and joyful presence to others. To consecrate time, work, and the proper use of money takes a lot of effort at mindfulness in approaching these important realities, but through habit it becomes effortless with the passage of time.

A vibrant, deeply meaningful spiritual life, in this dangerous and uncertain age, requires an openness to all the other sources of authentic spirituality in the great world religions, an openness, welcoming attitude, and a willingness, or eagerness to explore the treasures found there. I call this attitude and capacity of openness, willingness and generosity, particularly when it actually explores these sources or some of them, *interspirituality*. In my life, interspirituality is really the living thread of my identity as a monk or contemplative in the world. Interspirituality is an essential part

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How to be a Mystic

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of an authentic spirituality in our time, since it is a form of spaciousness of being, and it is this quality of spaciousness that so characterizes the mature mystic in society today. It is interspirituality that positions us to appreciate and drink deeply from the mystical wisdom of all the traditions in such a way that we and our communities benefit.

A mystic, monk, or contemplative in the world is, or has to be bounded by awareness, and the nature of this awareness is an intense realization of what is real in each moment. A person with a highly developed spirituality rests in the heart of this awareness that has two dimensions: the vertical and the horizontal. Vertical awareness is a profound, growing perception and discernment of the Divine Presence within us, around us, in our relationships, in nature, the cosmos, and in everything. To be vertically enlightened means to be always conscious of the Spirit's reality and Presence to us. Everything related to God's reality, or that of infinite awareness itself is part of this vertical direction of contemplative awareness.

Horizontal awareness is that same contemplative capacity directed to all our relationships with others: family, friends, associates, and all the people we meet in the course of each day. This includes all other sentient beings, as well as trees, bushes, flowers, mountains, lakes, rivers, oceans, deserts, and the universe itself. In all these perceptions and relationships the Divine Reality shines forth, and the person's response expresses an awareness that reveals itself as love-in-action, kindness, loving-compassion, mercy, and a spacious sensitivity that is so aware of the preciousness of all beings, where we wish only to affirm and protect others, while enhancing their lives. Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, St. Francis, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King are all examples of both the horizontal and vertical awareness in perfect balance. Each of them integrated their contemplative experience with their service to humanity. This integration is very much the case with the Dalai Lama, who often says that his religion is kindness. Finally, this awareness is summed up by Allen Ginsberg, who proclaims: "Holy is the supernatural, extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul." Kindness is a solid indication of the fullness of awareness. v

**THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
DEATH OF ABHISHIKTANANDA**

Henri Le Saux OSB, better known as Swami Abhishiktananda, died of a heart attack on the night of December 7, 1973, in the hospital at Indore, India. Born in Brittany in 1910, he entered the Benedictine monastery of St. Anne of Kergonan when he was nineteen. After meeting Jules Monchanin, he went to India in August 1948. The two visited Tiruvannamalai, site of Mt. Arunachala, and there Abhishiktananda had a decisive encounter with Ramana Maharshi. In March 1950, Monchanin and Le Saux founded Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam. v

BEDE GRIFFITHS PANEL IN THAILAND

Douglas Conlan

During the Conference on religion and Globalisation held at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in July 2003, the Bede Griffiths Trust presented a panel that, through personal memoir and anecdotal stories, focused on the life and vision of the late Father Bede Griffiths as an inter-faith bridge-builder. It seemed to many at the conference that the positive contribution that has been made and still may be made by individuals to the cause of building a world of justice and harmony between religions is a significant dimension, the sight of which might be lost in a world that focuses so much on the economic, military and political aspects of globalisation. Some hundreds of participants had gathered from all over the world, but particularly from Thailand and other parts of Asia for a week of dialogue, networking and friendly academic debate. The Trust's panel was the final presentation of the conference, but it was by no means the one that had least impact. All who attended showed, by their response to a short photographic history of Bede Griffiths, and the questions put to members of the panel, a sincere interest in finding out more about this remarkable western Christian teacher and exemplar of inter-faith dialogue.

Bede Griffiths' life is an inter-religious "case study." Because of his commitment to building a just world for those whose lives he served, local villages surrounding the ashram in South India benefit from having extra fresh water wells constructed with help from the ashram. Because of Bede's non-discriminative attitude to people of all faiths, an ecumenical retirement village for aged and infirm landless and former bonded-labourers has been constructed nearby. Unemployed young women and girls are taught sewing, and other craft skills as a way of enhancing their employment prospects and domestic skills. The ashram has, on its few acres of land, traditionally produced much of its own food requirements; vegetables, fruit and milk for the community and visitors. Because of the personal experiences of panelists, associated with Father Bede and his ashram, the Trust, through the speakers, was able to inject a softer, zesty and always humorous voice as the conference wound down. The aim of our discussion was to explore means by which the lessons of his "new vision of reality" might be discovered, developed, and shared with a wider global audience. Our hopes are that we at least made an effective and practical contribution that might help begin a search in the hearts and minds of many of our listeners. v

"You know of course, Andrew, that we are in the hour of God . . . The whole human race has now come to the moment when everything is at stake, when a vast shift of consciousness will have to take place on a massive scale in all societies and religions for the world to survive."

Bede Griffiths to Andrew Harvey, December 1992 v

THE JESUS SUPPER: A FULL EUCHARIST
Part II **Beatrice Bruteau**

The Camaldolese Example

Concern for the environment is one of the things that St. Romuald's descendants, our contemporary Camaldolese hermits and oblates, are stressing in their spirituality. This goes back to the 11th century monks who formulated the first Italian forestry code, protecting what is now an extensive national park. The same concern is present in the activities of the Big Sur monks in the Four Winds Council, which incorporates Native Americans and their spirituality, and directs attention to the coastal lands in their vicinity¹.

This Camaldolese charism covers many items that fall under the heading of *Practicum*. Primarily, the Camaldolese do modeling of the values they are promoting by actually living them. They present the good life in terms of three dimensions: Community, Solitude, and Ministry. They live in deep sharing with their companions but they also live alone. Living alone gives one silence and freedom to do one's own thing in peace. This accent on the individual is very important to this spirituality. And what is gained in both the time alone and the time in community is generously shared with anyone who is in need and who is interested in learning this way of life. So "explaining" and "encouraging" are also part of the package. Retreats and workshops, conferences, publications are all avenues for sharing their sense of good living and serious loving.

They are also especially given to being welcoming and supportive of other people's discoveries and practices. Ideas from other traditions are deeply respected here. More than 40% of the 350 American Camaldolese Oblates are non-Catholics. This is a strong and enlightened initiative, a good example of what I mean by serious loving, acting in terms of our profession that all people are equally Children of God and are to be respected as such. If this divine filiation and its implications are the Good News *about* people to be preached *to* people, then these ecumenical and interfaith practices are fulfilling the injunction to preach the Gospel throughout the world. In support of this point, consider Robert Hale's essay on "*koinonia*" (community) in which he in turn quotes from the *Camaldolese Constitutions*:

The reverencing of *koinonia* . . . in its widest extension, explains the Camaldolese commitment to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. So our *Constitutions* affirm: "The whole world is aware of a new ecumenical climate which is creating, or enhancing the condition for dialogue among believers of the great faiths. Catholics, Christians of other confessions, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all persons of good will are seeking new ways of growing in the truth and in communion." These "new ways of growing in the truth and in communion" are explored through study and writing, ecumenical dialogue, covenant relations, and in a special way through ecumenical hospitality,

through a welcoming into our *koinonia* of our brothers and sisters who journey from elsewhere. (no. 125)

This attitude and these activities, says Hale, are in "the tradition of our fathers" and "their spiritual freedom," coming down from St. Romuald.

Refusing to be inhibited by differences among the faiths, the Camaldolese devote themselves to forming communities of shared interests, recognizing and building on "commonness," and being hospitable, welcoming, bringing people in and treating them well, loving them seriously with respect and warmth, practicing a eucharistic giving of themselves and partaking of the others, making the Kingdom present.

The Kingdom and the New Creation

And to the extent that what we call "the Kingdom" is present, we begin to appreciate the moral power of united people. Peter-Damian Belisle, in his book *The Wheel of Becoming*, says:

Through our wholeness we help to form a Spiritual Creation... This is inspirable life, a share in eternity's promise ... a wheel of becoming which invites us to ... become part of a renewed creation, moving in a convergent circle of love.²

The "renewed creation" points to a new set of principles for structuring our social life. The original Jesus social program may have included suggestions for economic and financial cooperation to relieve the immediate problems his people had with heavy taxation, indebtedness, and land loss. Problems like those arise when the principles are based on each party acting for his own interest in disregard of the consequences for others. Jesus proposes principles that are based on care for others in union with care for ourselves. He may have urged that the major problem of the foreign occupation was better dealt with by non-violent means than by taking up arms. When you begin from the proposition that we are all Children of God, you have to develop different practical social behaviors.

If enough people had signed onto these new-creation social principles and had worked with them to find feasible practical applications, the movement might have become a real alternative to the globalized oppression that was the Roman Empire. When enough people can unite around a moral purpose, they stand a good chance of prevailing. We ourselves have been witnesses of this in such matters as extended voting rights, civil rights for all races, and protection of workers. We are struggling now for human rights in a number of countries, and it is the degree of our commitment, our covenanted union and the strength of our spirit that will help to achieve this very important goal.

Robert Hale, speaking of "this bond of gospel simplicity and charity" uniting the community, quotes the Epistle to the Ephesians, which says:

Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force [until

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The Jesus Supper (Continued from page 4)

we] form that perfect person who is Christ come to full stature. (Eph 4:3,13)

In other words, it takes the *whole people* to form the complete Messiah, and the Messianic Era comes only insofar as people do unite in these values.

But as we do attain our goals of goodness of life for all people, the beauty and goodness of the Friendship Sharing Covenanted Community comes out in its proper glory. To be in this Community, in the Complete Messiah, is to be "a new creation." And to be a New Creation means to enter into the future of God. It is to renounce lordship as a principle and forsake being either dominant or submissive. Instead, one offers to be food for one's friends and receives the nourishment they offer in turn. It is to experience oneself as an individual and ourselves as a community as free energy radiating out to give life abundantly to all. It is to be an indispensable member of a great Living One, the Living One who is not to be sought among the dead, who is rather the One who is Coming to Be. It is to be integral to the new and ever renewing act of creation which improvises at the frontier of the future. v

1. J. Spencer & M. Fish, "The Camaldolese Oblate Program," in *The Privilege of Love* (Peter-Damian Belisle, ed., Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 180.

2. Peter-Damian Belisle, *The Wheel of Becoming*, St. Bede's Press, 1987, p. 87.

Abhishiktananda (Continued from page 1)

distinction of culture, language or nationality. Therefore the teachings that have flowed from this supreme wisdom represent the attempt, always fatally inadequate, to express in a form that is comprehensible to the limited human psyche that which by its very nature is absolutely ineffable.

The Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the first Councils are nothing else than one form — among an indefinite number of forms — to communicate to ourselves and to [others] the divine mystery... The Trinity does not exist only in connection with us. No formula can ever explain the mystery of the Being.

The rituals, devotional practices and precepts that developed later and ultimately characterize the different *dharmas* mark out a path that has been refined and improved over the centuries, to make what has been granted to a few by grace accessible to everyone by practice, perseverance and faith. Therefore every proposed path, exactly because it is a path, reaches its fulfilment and realization precisely in the moment when it is surpassed, giving way to the supreme knowledge of the Real. The awareness of the need for this surpassing does not stand in contrast to the performance of rituals and one's commitment to the spiritual search; on the contrary, it fills with significance what would otherwise be nothing more than superstition or empty ritualism. The boat, as a famous Buddhist aphorism says, is necessary to cross the river, but as soon as the river has been crossed, the boat has to be left behind, because from then on it would only be an encumbrance. However, the knowledge that we

will have to leave the boat after having reached the further shore is not a problem nor need it distract us from rowing with enthusiasm and determination!

So the allegoric and symbolic world of any given religious expression is that which is most directly understandable within the cultural context in which it has developed. The Christian symbology bound to the vine, olive and bread evokes images that have been speaking directly from the depths of Mediterranean psyche since the dawn of its history. Refusing that symbology and embracing in its place a tradition that expresses itself through distant and unknown archetypes would be like adding a heavy bundle on the back of a donkey that is already plodding along a steep trail. If such importance is given to the traditional and ritual — that is, psychological — component of religion to the point of choosing another that is believed to be more efficacious, is there not a risk of losing sight of the "one thing necessary"?

To embark on a new path with enthusiasm, leaving behind the world that seemed empty and tedious to us, can of course bring a certain psychological serenity and tranquility, but does this have anything to do with Being? Serenity should not be the goal; serenity is rather the natural consequence of the experience of the Spirit, which ultimately has nothing to do with one or another method. Does it make sense to discuss if a red boat is any better than a green one? If a wooden one is better than an iron one? They have all been built by capable and expert carpenters. The most important thing is to jump into the most familiar one and to row vigorously towards the further shore. Choosing one or the other just because we've heard good things about it, or because one of our friends has already used it, or because we like its color, would be a needless waste of time if we end up having to look for the oars, the rowlocks and the most comfortable position for rowing! Besides that we would run the risk of being so enamoured with our boat that we could spend our whole life sailing all along the river, certainly becoming expert rowers and sailors, but without ever reaching the further shore.

Only those who have best assimilated their own tradition can dare to go beyond. Otherwise what we have are only dilettantes' day-dreams with disastrous consequences on both sides; as we often commented: all those superficial 'enthusiasts' damage rather than aiding both the Western tradition they come from and the Eastern tradition they pretend to emulate.

Yet precisely because they are all expressions of absolute truth, the different paths that have been traced represent a human patrimony which no one thirsty for true wisdom can escape from recognizing as sparks from the same fire. The deep intuitions of the Upanishads and the living experience of the sages have removed the veil of ignorance from thousands of people, endlessly increasing the ranks of saints and masters who have succeeded each other for millenia in the land of Bharat. "One cannot believe that such intuitions will not evoke wonderful echoes in the Christian soul despite the

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Abhishiktananda

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differences in expression, or that they will not ally themselves with all that has been previously discovered in prayer and in communion with Jesus' own experience." Looking at the boats closest to ours, watching their rowing or the position of the occupants, admiring their determination or studying the routes they follow to avoid dangerous currents, can only help us, and sometimes can even reveal itself to be a determining factor in the success of our own crossing.

The importance and greatness of Henri le Saux consists precisely in his ability to lay bare every image or myth in order to grasp the substantial unity of the message that flowed out from the experience of the ancient rishis and from the teachings of Christ at its depth. This allowed him to penetrate so deeply into Indian spirituality that he was recognized by Hindus themselves as a genuine sannyasi, a witness of the Presence, while nevertheless holding firmly to his Christian and Benedictine roots. Of course he lived this feeling of being "both deeply Christian and deeply Hindu" in a very tormented way. On one side there was the incomprehension of friends and acquaintances who thought he was pushing on decidedly too far; on the other side there was the astonishment of Hindus before what they saw as an obstinate attachment to Christianity by a person already opened to the Mystery of Being. Yet it was precisely his "visceral attachment to the Christian mythos" that made his experience be the ferment for a double evangelization: evangelization of the East through the only possible way, in the radical form of Indian monastic life; and evangelization of the West with the re-discovery, through the Indian wisdom, of the "Christianity of the Presence." v

(From Stefano Rossi's introduction to his Italian translation of Abhishiktananda's 'The Secret of Arunachala,' soon to be published by Edizioni il Messaggero. This extract was translated by Mr. Rossi and by Cyprian Consiglio.)

FATHER BEDE AS FRIEND AND GUIDE

I was a visitor at Shantivanam between 1982 and 1988. Like many others I came back over and over again enjoying the wisdom and the company of Father Bede. . . The little cross was given to me when I decided to take a layman's vow of "walking with God in mind" as Father Bede put it at the time. To me it has been an inspiration in my day to day life ever since. I am now the husband of a lovely soul and father of three 'little ones' and what I discovered about myself, with the guidance from Father Bede, has always been invaluable.

I took to heart his reminder that I had to go out and live a life full of love and compassion. It was no good for me to hang around the ashram, however pleasant and fulfilling it felt at the time. I am writing this a couple of hours after I found your site, having blocked the family phone line longer than what is common, and I feel that my time at Shantivanam is as pertinent to me as ever. It is a good life!

Hakan Sandgren, Southport, Australia v

SHANTIVANAM: A SPIRITUAL REPORT

Ken Meece

Let me introduce you to Shantivanam, this place that I have recently experienced as a place of promise. Shantivanam is a Benedictine, Camaldolese ashram (related to the Camaldolese monastery at Big Sur), dedicated to the mutual transformation of both Christianity and the Vedanta (Hinduism) through an interpenetrating dialogue at the experiential level.

Shantivanam was founded in 1950 by two French priests who had great love for Indian spirituality. Jules Monchanin had been the parish priest for a small village in Tamil Nadu since 1938. he was a scholar, not only of the Vedanta, including the Sanskrit language of its primary texts, but of all world religions. He was convinced that the simple monastic-type life of a Hindu ashram would be conducive to a deep encounter and contemplative dialogue between the two faiths. Henri le Saux was a Benedictine monk in France who met Fr. Monchanin, and received permission to join him in South India in order to support the foundation of the ashram.

There were huge differences between these two men. One was a scholar, the other a monk. One wanted dialogue, the other wanted direct experience. One wanted to explore, ever so respectfully, the differences between the two faiths, and the other wanted to plunge into the depths of the Vedanta, as a Christian, to discover the bedrock of common reality underlying each. Eventually they separated.

Henri le Saux took the name Swami Abhishiktananda, and was known by this name the rest of his life. Abhishiktananda discovered that he had a love-hate relationship with the ashram and its obligations. He traveled to and stayed for long periods in various holy sites and met with some key holy persons, including the great Sri Ramana Maharshi. He finally permanently left the ashram for a hermitage in the Himalayas. Fortunately he was also a scholar and a very fine writer, and wrote many books as well as a large correspondence which has been published.

Abhishiktananda died in 1973, which coincidentally was the year I first traveled to India and heard of Shantivanam. Since 1968, because Abishiktananda had left, a new teacher / guru had come to the ashram. His name was Fr. Bede Griffiths. He was an English Benedictine monk who at the age of 50 had gone to India to find the "other half of my soul" as he put it. He was a lifelong friend of C. S. Lewis (whom he had met at university while reading literature and poetry), was himself a fine writer, and was far more suited than Abhishiktananda to his role at the ashram. Though he was a monk and committed hours every day to meditation, he was extraverted and loved people. He had been guest-master at his monastery, and proved to be a welcoming magnet for visitors to Shantivanam. He died there in 1993, having welcomed thousands of visitors to Shantiva-

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Shantivanam

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nam, written many books, and after having not only found the other half of his soul but experienced in his own person the marriage of East and West. . . .

In 1974, after I had spent a year with a Tibetan Buddhist lama near Katmandu, someone recommended to me that I should go south to meet Bede Griffiths. Had I done so, my love for Buddhism would certainly have moved over a bit to make room for an interest and love for the tradition of the Vedanta. As it happens, this has taken quite a few extra years to conceive and experience, largely during the last five years through reading Abhishiktananda.

Vedanta is a word meaning “the end of the Vedas” – which were the ancient spiritual scriptures of the Indian people. This end, or fulfillment (depending on point of view), began with the first of the Upanishads, written about 800 BCE, and continued until about 300 BCE. The Vedanta aims people away from the various rites and rituals of the Vedas and toward a development of a direct experience of the divine, of ultimate reality, of Brahman, of God. Essentially, the work of Gotama Buddha, during these several hundred years of the composition of the Upanishads, was another Upanishad, a part of the Vedanta, as Hindus consider it to be to this day.

In the 7th century of the Christian era, a great philosopher, Shankara, lived and wrote in Kerala, south India. He was the Thomas Aquinas of the Vedanta. He developed the philosophy of *Advaita*, or non-dualism. Everything that is is one integrated, unified whole; indeed, is Brahman, is God.

Five hundred years later Ramanuja, who lived in Tamil Nadu, developed the philosophy of *Vi-sista-advaita*, which is often translated as qualified non-dualism. It is essentially a pantheistic philosophy, which does not claim that everything is God but that everything is in God and God in everything.

Shankara’s advaitism could be described as monism. Ramanuja’s *Vi-sista-advaita* is neither monism nor dualism: “not one – not two”. If that seems baffling or paradoxical to you, consider a pregnant woman and her developing baby. She/they are “not one – not two”. Ramanuja’s favorite and paradigmatic example of “not one – not two” is the relatedness of body and mind. His philosophy does not claim that all phenomenon are Maya or illusory (as does Shankara’s), but also that they are not independent realities (independent of the One, the Absolute, or of one another) either. The diversity of the phenomenal world is real, you and I are real, but all the diversity is interconnected and “in God” or a manifestation of Brahman, though not identical with Brahman. So you and I, God and creation, are “not one – not two” just as a pregnant woman and her child are “not one – not two”. And indeed we know that after a child is born the two “separate” bodies and minds and hearts and souls are not absolutely separate, but related at their very core. Likewise, all of creation, and the Creator or Source, are related at their core: “not one – not two”.

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Christian faith, whether Unitarian or Trinitarian, has its philosophical source in the Greeks, who laid the philosophical foundations for western civilization about 500 BCE. The work at Shantivanam is to explore the form that Christian faith takes when the philosophical foundations are provided by the tradition of the Vedanta, the Upanishads and the great Shankara and Ramanuja.

At Shantivanam there is common prayer three times daily, and in every worship time there are readings from the world scriptures. These include, of course, the Upanishads and the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita and epic poetry of the Hindu tradition. But the readings also include Chinese texts (Taoist and Confucian and Buddhist), Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, the Koran, the Sikh scriptures, and of course Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Sanskrit chants open and close all worship.

Truly, Shantivanam (“peaceful forest”) is a laboratory of a universal religious expression . . . The focus is not on beliefs but experience, direct experience of the divine, beyond thoughts and words, cultivated in the silence of the “cave of the heart” (a vedantic phrase denoting the silent transcendent center of all being), and on deep dialogue among people of all faiths, including the scientific faith.

All worship and divine experience at Shantivanam is also preparation for action, mainly service to the poorest of the poor of India. In our brief recent visit we were fortunate to share the ashram with about 60 young Tamils, 20 studying for the priesthood and 40 training to be brothers, truly servants for the poor. These were wonderful young men, kind and curious and committed and concerned. . . .

Forty percent of the Indian population is “untouchable” – virtual slaves and outcasts in their own country. The castes are often, of course, ethnic and racial in reality, and the high castes are profoundly oppressive of the lower castes. It is difficult not to see the caste system as a whole as an unmitigated evil. Christian work for the poor, following the example of Jesus’ ministry, is deeply threatening to the oppressive castes and people of India, who accuse Christians of fraud and bribery in their commitment to education, health-care and economic freedom for untouchables and lower castes. There are laws against conversion to Christianity; obviously there is no freedom of religion in India. So there is a great deal of tension and indeed danger in this work that these young people are training and committed to do.

An interesting challenge we noticed for them in this ashram had to do with the use of Sanskrit chants, for example. Sanskrit is the language of the Brahmins, the highest or priestly caste. Recently, lower caste people using the language were subject to physical abuse as punishment for being out of place. The whole endeavor at the ashram to integrate or mutually nourish Christianity and the Vedanta creates deeply mixed feelings among many of these young Christians – who often come from lower castes. Twenty per-

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Shantivanam

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cent of Tamil Nadu is Christian, and Christianity there goes back 2000 years.

The current teacher at Shantivanam is Brother Martin, whose Sanskrit name is Swami Sahajananda. Sahaja means “ordinary” so his name is “the bliss of the ordinary”. We met Brother Martin five years ago, and I was quite excited to see and hear him again. I was not disappointed. I will share a few snippets from his marvelous talks.

He spoke of Jesus’ growth as a person passing through 4 stages or births:

1. He became a human through his birth into the family of Mary and Joseph and his siblings.
2. He was born into his people’s traditions through his study of Judaism and his visit to the Temple.
3. He was born into universalism, the universal God, at his baptism. This is when he transcended the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and became connected to the God beyond all religions, “I am who I am.” It was Mary’s virginity/silence that allowed her to do the same in conceiving Jesus; it is Jesus’ virginity/silence that allowed him to do the same, and our virginity/silence that can allow us to truly be universalist. Brother Martin points out that it was Moses’ inability to relate to “I am who I am” that prompted God to make the ‘sacrifice’ of identifying himself as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” – not a universal but a tribal god.
4. He was born to the advaitic non-dual experience of God when he said “The Father and I are one.” Note that it was in this context that he also said: “As I am in you and you in me, may they also be in us” – this non-dual experience is available and intended for everyone, not only for Jesus.

Brother Martin sees six stages in the broad spectrum of human growth: pre-social union, social identity, individual rebellion, mature individuality, universalist mysticism, and finally advaitic realization.

Clearly, his interpretation of the gospels is both to see Jesus as human and divine, and also to see all humanity likewise. He summed up his principles for interpreting any scriptural text, in any tradition. An interpretation must be:

1. universal, a truth relevant for everyone, everywhere
2. unifying, breaking through all divisions, boundaries and (dualistic) rules
3. liberating, a path and force for freedom
4. promoting growth in persons and community
5. open-ended: never the last word, always open to further exploration, insight, freedom, growth and unity.

. . . . The wisdom traditions of the eternal truth of underlying unity typically lead to a perspective that all is perfect, so that there is nothing to be done, and little basis for and ethic of social activism. Thus in India, truly wise men and women are unmoved by the plight of the poor, the oppressed of the caste system. Since all is illusion, it cannot be evil. But Jesus’ home tradition was a prophetic tradition that was

a call to action, to healing, to active love. In the prophetic traditions the world is not illusion or evil, but a place in which to manifest the “glory of God” – which means the presence of the eternal, the dignity of persons, and justice in relationships.

Jesus said “I and the Father are one” (the core wisdom message) and he also said “What you do to the least of these, you do to me” (a core prophetic message). He called people to relationships in which the divine is made manifest in ordinary life in love, in active service to one another. It was not enough for him to awaken; he went on to live his life in a way that called on others to awaken and to transform the world in which they lived. He challenged ignorance and he unmasked evil. He took prophetic action that cost him his life.

Yet when Pilate asked him “What is truth?” he, like the rishis, was silent. He had shown forth the truth, freedom and life, and there was nothing to add by mere words. Thus, Jesus combined the wisdom and prophetic traditions. This, as far as I know, was new in all history, and set in motion a spirit to change the world, that is based on the eternal truth available to all by waking up.

Jesus’ message has been kept alive, though it has been largely distorted into the same old divisiveness. The advaitic experience of the fundamental unifying truth underlying all the diversity of the world, is a basis for active life that can keep us from infecting our social action with divisiveness and dualisms.

This is an understanding of Jesus, and of all people everywhere, that is framed and focused by the advaitic experiences supported by the Vedanta. Brother Martin says that “The New Testament is the Upanishads of the biblical tradition.” I think you can see that this is a huge augmentation of the frame derived from Greek philosophy, and you can see the Hebrew and Greek emphasis on justice likewise augments the tradition of the Vedanta.

So in this little ashram by the river Cauvery in south India, there is incubating a profound perspective, that looks toward a world beyond religious divisiveness . . .

(Edited from a longer text) v

CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN OUR TIME

Abhishiktananda

Now is the moment for contemplatives. But what a vibrant presence we should have in the world, and in the depth of our silence. Not an escape, but a penetration to the very heart. That is what now I should like to understand and to make understood — and, most of all, to live. Respect for contemplative values in the Church and in the world will not come because we preach about them, but because in our life of silence we are totally human.

(Abhishiktananda, His Life Told through his Letters, edited by James Stuart, Delhi, ISPCK 1995, p. 206.) v

THE NOONDAY OF EAST AND WEST

Bruno Barnhart

Suppose that we live in the evening of western civilization and on the eve of a global humanity. Suppose that one of the gifts that belong to our late hour is a depth of historical vision with which we can trace the unfolding of the event of Christ — something like the view of the Universe, closer and closer to its beginning, which we get from today's radio telescopes and particle accelerators.

Suppose, further, that Jesus is the 'noonday of history,' between the morning light of the East and the afternoon or evening light of the West. The Christian fathers sometimes wrote of 'morning knowledge' and 'evening knowledge' — as, for instance, divine contemplation and the understanding of created things. This powerful metaphor fits well the contrasting modes of consciousness that characterize the venerable Asian religious traditions on the one hand, and the swiftly evolving modern West on the other: wisdom and science, contemplation and rationality, unitive experience and empirical fact.

The same contrast, in fact, can be found between the Christian tradition in the West — say until 1200 — and the modern secular western tradition. The Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin contrasted the two types of consciousness as "ideational" (equivalent to 'spiritual') and "sensate." He found the two alternating in the course of history, with a third "idealistic" culture — like that of the early Renaissance — between them, combining the traits of both.

In Jesus, the 'morning light' which is the Divine Word (cf Jn 1:1-5,9) has "become flesh" (Jn 1:14), so that the Divine Wisdom is newly present within bodily human beings in history. Further, this descending dynamic of Incarnation becomes the form of a new history — and the focus of a new 'evening light': the light of human rationality that gradually brings into existence a human world. We can see this humanizing process in the evolution of the western sense of the person, of justice, of human rights and human potential in this world, as well as in the still more 'material' flourishing of science and technology in the West.

The same parabolic form appears in the life of Jesus himself, as he grows from childhood to the epiphany of his baptism by John in the Jordan river, to the noonday of the Transfiguration; then begins the descent toward his passion and death. Jesus' first lesson to his disciples is the 'ascending' illumination of his divine identity; his second and more difficult teaching is the way of the cross — of descent — which is inseparable from this identity. The same way of ascent and descent, from baptismal birth to eucharistic death, is to be walked by the disciples.

The peoples and the church of the West have a strange and unique role to fulfill in the historical progression from the Christ-event to the advent of a 'world

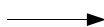
church' (which Karl Rahner saw appearing in the Second Vatican Council) and a global humanity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the same drama of morning, noon and evening be visible in our western history. In the late middle ages, for a century or two, Europe was unified within the matrix of Catholic faith, and at the same time there began a swift unfolding of the full potential of the human person — its various dimensions manifest in a Francis of Assisi, a Thomas Aquinas, a Meister Eckhart, a Dante Alighieri — before the fragile equilibrium was shattered and the process of differentiation and division prevailed, leading to the fragmentation of our modern western culture. That brief medieval 'noonday' was not the attainment of a perfect church or society, nor was it something that we can return to. Yet, reflecting the original moment of Incarnation, it was a revelation of human fullness that continues to shed its manifold light upon us.

Looking back over the past two thousand years of history in the West in the most simplistic way, one can imagine that the first millennium was ruled by the morning light of monastic contemplation (while critical reason remained undeveloped) and the second millennium by the evening light of human rationality. During the brief noonday between those two slopes, contemplation and conceptual reason were held together in a fertile interaction. It was the 'metaphysical moment' of the West in which the divine light shone forth at the center of the human person and, simultaneously, the person awakened to its freedom and to the autonomy and scope of its reasoning power. It was the moment when Aquinas captured the intuition of Being in his philosophical language and when Eckhart penetrated in his experience and his thought to the nuclear truth of nonduality. It was then that the 'perennial philosophy' so prized by Bede Griffiths reached its highest development in the West.

In the growing morning light before that time, the monastic theologians can be imagined climbing a spiritual ladder toward the contemplative realization of divine union. After that time, we watch western philosophy begin its swift descent into the earthly knowledge that is our modern empirical science. While secular scholars are inclined to write off the earlier period as a time of sterility, monastic thinkers, shocked by the apparent eclipse of wisdom in the modern West, have often been led to dismiss the modern developments as the sinister — or at best ambiguous and largely futile — fruits of an abandonment of Truth. The stakes in this controversy are very high, and either of these one-sided judgments is too costly.

The challenge to a new Christian theology is to find the continuity, the meaning and the direction of this history, and so to 'save' both the morning light and the evening light of our western tradition. When we have expressed the problem in these terms, perhaps we have come half-way toward a solution. At least we know where it is to be found — in Jesus Christ, who is the perennial Noonday

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The Golden String

Noonday of East and West (Continued from page 9)

between the morning 'Eastern' light and the late 'Western' light. He is the Word or Wisdom of God — itself divine and the source of the created world, according to the New Testament — who has become an embodied human being: *The Word became flesh. . .*

In the noonday light of embodied Divinity, there is a 'chemistry,' an energy of transmutation. The light itself, taking on flesh, becomes something new; human reason takes on something of the reach and power of the *Logos*. Wonders surpassing the miracles of divine power that accompanied Israel in its beginnings come about through the human mind and human efforts — now that the divine Mind has entered into humanity and into the human mind.

The great gift of Bede Griffiths has been to recover the morning light of the East and to communicate it to his fellow westerners. Late in his life, he turned more and more toward the future, as if glimpsing ahead a further realization of the event of Christ that would open our lives and our world to the single noonday light shining from East to West, from antiquity into our present and future. v

Visit

the Bede Griffiths Website:
www.bedegriffiths.com

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